

Only Good Dreams by TheComplex

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Work Text:

When Eleven first started living at the cabin, she was too worn out and weak to worry about much. She slept all day, a deep exhaustion weighing her down. It felt as if it were in her very bones.

And then, when she started to get a little stronger, she got sick. It was awful. It was as if her body was just holding off illness as long as it could until she could find a place to relax and then *wham*, it hit her like a ton of bricks.

But finally, finally, that was past. And it was when she stopped living purely for survival, when she started to gain a little weight and get a little bit of energy back, that's when the fear returned full force.

She was scared of everything. The dark. The wind. Little creaks through the cabin. Hopper's footsteps. His silhouette when he came around the corner unexpectedly. But mostly nightmares. They haunted her every night at The Beginning. She would wake up rigid with panic in the dead of night, screams forming in her throat...but she was no longer in a cold, tile holding cell where her sobs would echo endlessly, ignored.

The taste of copper would fill her mouth as she bit down on her fist. The pain kept the screams bubbling up in her throat at bay, terrified she would wake Hopper. If he knew she was having nightmares, he might ask more questions, and when questions concerned her past, questions were dangerous. Benny was proof of that. The less he knew about her experiences in the lab, the better. There was nothing worth compromising his safety.

But there was also that little voice in the back of her mind, one that had been there as long as she could remember, a voice full of poison. And it whispered all manner of vile things to her about herself. She was *unworthy* of help. Everyone she'd ever met outside of the lab had such full lives. They shared a bond she couldn't understand. Even Hopper, who had that same deep sadness she felt every day reflected in his eyes, even he would smile wistfully as he recalled stories of his

mother and father, his brother, his friends. He painted a picture of a happy time in his life for her, of relationships that had made him whole, of experiences that made his eyes crinkle at the edges. Comparatively she seemed so...empty. So hollow. Her friends had taken her in, shown her the kind of love she'd never known existed, and accepted her like family. And yet now she was coming to realize that not only did she not deserve it (she'd done things. She knew things), she paid them back in kind by putting them in danger. And the same was true with Hopper now. That night in the woods, when she'd made the choice to step out into the open, she had been desperate. She didn't remember the reason she hadn't gone back to Mike this whole time. She wasn't thinking about the consequences. All she was thinking about was the bitter cold, and the pain in her stomach, and the tremble in her knees that told her she wasn't going to make it much longer if she kept on like this. *Selfish*. She would never be able to give back what any of them had given her, though she desperately wanted to. She was damaged. *Incomplete*. She had never been able to give Papa what he asked of her, she wasn't strong enough or smart enough. She wasn't enough. And it didn't matter how far or how fast she ran from her past. She could never be the normal girl she ached to be, the girl her friends and Hopper deserved. She didn't deserve her new found home or the people that came with it, she knew that. They sacrificed so much for her, she could see it in the way that Hopper slouched, exhausted, after working double shifts and then coming home to cook meals and read with her. She tried to be as little of a burden as possible. To help around the house, to stay out of the way, and especially important, to never worry Hopper with her problems.

So whenever she woke, covered in cold sweat, shaking, with Papa's disappointed face still burned behind her eyelids, she bit her knuckles until they bled, but so help her she did not wake the softly snoring man in the living room.

She'd perfected the art of self-comfort in the lab. There, in the pitch darkness of her cell, the terrors came nightly. If it wasn't too bad, she might tuck her knees up to her chest and rock herself, humming tunelessly until her heart calmed. If it was bad, she could pinch her arm and hold it there, the little throb of pain grounding her, reminding her that the nightmare was not her reality, though her

reality hadn't been much better.

In the cabin, the night terrors somehow had become more intense than they ever had been before. Visions of Papa finding her, forcing her to go back to that place. Of waking up in the Upside Down again, this time with no escape. Of the Demogorgon returning. Of her friends getting hurt because of her. There was no falling asleep again after those dreams. Curled up, desperately trying to get her breathing under control, she would stay like that for four or five hours some nights. The nightlight and cracked door doing little to alleviate the feeling of being locked in the Alone Room again. And in the morning she feigned wakefulness when Hopper would come to get her up for breakfast. But apparently Hop was more observant than she gave him credit for.

It took about a week and a half for him to figure out what was happening. He'd thought the girl might be using her powers at night when he first found blood on the pillow, but soon noticed the raw, red marks she tried to hide with her long sleeves. And the dark circles under her eyes and sluggish movements just weren't adding up to the amount of sleep she appeared to be getting each night.

One night before bed, Hopper came into her room to read with the little girl, as was their nightly custom. He sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, tapped the spot next to him for El to sit down. Slowly, because he knew by now she didn't like surprises, and surprise touches even less, he took the girl's too small hands in his and turned them over, palms down, to reveal the jagged cuts on her hands, the fingernails bitten down to the quick. El was unable to meet his eyes, her body going rigid and curling in on itself in that way she did when she was anticipating some form of reprimand. His heart had squeezed painfully. Jeez, this poor kid.

"No, I'm not-I'm not mad at you." He'd said genuinely "It's ok to be scared, alright? I get scared all the time. And if you need to cry or...or scream, whatever, you let it out. You don't need to hide it."

El hesitantly met his gaze.

"And if you're afraid, if it's too much, well, the door is open. You can come wake me up and we'll have a cup of hot cocoa, yeah?"

Eleven just blinked at him, and Hop sighed sadly, not seeing that scenario happening any time soon.

"But...if you gotta bite something," he grabbed the quilt and held it up, "I'm going to need to replace these blankets soon anyways, they're slightly ancient. And your hands are far too pretty for that. Understand?"

He tried a smile. El seemed to relax slightly as she nodded in affirmative.

After that talk he didn't see any more blood on the pillow, and that week he found himself stumbling through the beauty section of the local drugstore, picking out two different colors of nail polish, one pink and the other purple. When the cashier raised his eyebrows at him, he just shrugged sheepishly. "*Women, right?*" And for once in his life thanked his lucky stars for the unsavory status he'd earned in Hawkins through the last few years. Not that he'd ever cared what anyone in that gossipy little town thought about him, but ever since Eleven had come into his life he'd been forced to pay attention to whispers about him.

El had no idea what nail polish was for, but her fingers tentatively brushed over the soft pink color she was so fond of, so they tried that one first. Eleven didn't seem to find it odd, as most would have, that he knew how to apply nail polish, and quite well, too. He was glad she didn't ask. Once he was finished, the little girl stared down at her nails in wonder. Her eyes kept returning to her hands the rest of the day, fixated, and she was very careful touching anything, afraid to damage the color, for the rest of the week.

The marks on her hands healed. But the circles under her eyes remained, and every day she seemed more exhausted. She jumped at every little sound and shadow and her hands shook. And Hopper grew more and more concerned, not only for her mental state, but also for her physical health. The girl was already gaunt and too thin. She was still recovering from a month and a half living rough, she couldn't afford the lack of sleep and subsequent lack of appetite. But he held back, following his instincts not to push it.

He could see the struggle Eleven was going through. What must it be

like to try to trust, after having that same trust broken and used for so long? To ask for help when you never had that option before? To depend on another person after depending only on yourself for so long? He understood it wasn't going to be easy for Eleven to let go of that mindset of self-preservation and start to depend. But watching her suffer as she fought to tear down and re-build everything she knew about living was a painful experience.

Weeks passed, things got worse each day. Internally, Hopper was on the verge of panic. He couldn't help but feel like he'd failed. He wasn't able to help this girl. Why he'd thought he of all people could take on the needs of another child again was beyond him. He was broken. An irreversibly broken man who'd been a fool to think that maybe, just maybe, he could start again.

That same night, he woke from a deep sleep, disoriented, not sure what had caused him to awaken. His heart gave a jolt of adrenaline when he saw the silhouette of a figure standing beside his makeshift bed in the near pitch-darkness, then quickly relaxed when he realized it was Eleven, and then filled with concern once he saw that she was trembling uncontrollably. He sat up quickly, voice thick with sleep.

"El? What's wrong?"

She didn't respond, didn't even move. Frozen on the spot just looking at him with wide, terrified eyes. There were no tears, but the unfathomable pain in the depths of her gaze sent chills down his spine. Her face was ghostly white and her arms were wrapped tightly around her shaking frame as if it were the only thing holding her together. She didn't say a word, but her plea echoed in his mind as clearly as if it were spoken aloud:

Help me. Help me. Please help me.

It was devastating. Without hesitation, he opened his arms to her and she immediately went to him, clinging to him like her life depended on it.

"Hey, hey, hey. It's ok, it's ok, kid. You're here. You're right here. Nothing can hurt you. I've got you."

He pushed the covers back and scooped the girl up onto the couch with him, folding her up against his chest. He held her tight and whispered words of assurance over and over as she finally allowed herself to give in to the pain and the fear. About half an hour passed, and the sobs subsided to occasional whimpers, and the whimpers then turned into slow, even breaths. Hopper rubbed her back until he was sure she was asleep. Concerned she would grow afraid again or wake up if he tried to move her, he sat there awhile, debating what to do next. His eyelids grew heavy amidst his indecision, and not long after he too drifted off, head lolling back on the couch. So when Eleven woke the next morning, he was still there, one lazy arm draped across her and the other flung across his eyes, snoring softly.

Eleven came to him every night after that. It became a regular routine. Sometimes she was crying, sometimes not. Either way, hot cocoa was in order. And then they would fall asleep on the couch. Hopper's back and neck ached from nights spent sitting on or curled up in strange positions on the couch. But he never complained, because not only did El grow healthier every day, but her behavior towards him had begun to change as well. She stuck to him like glue, wanting to do whatever he was doing, wanting to go wherever he went. Where she used to shrink away from physical contact, she now seemed to crave it. She spoke more. She asked more questions. A timid trust had begun to grow. And after a few more weeks passed, and the nightly visits grew less and less frequent. Once Eleven knew she had a safe place to go, the terrors began to subside.

Months later, Eleven rarely left her room at nights. The unpleasant dreams still visited her sometimes, but each time she jolted awake, gasping for breath, she could hear Hop's reassuring voice in her head and her rapid heartbeat would slow. And slowly, bit by bit, pleasant dreams began to push out the nightmares. And in the morning, the warm, yellow sunlight would stream through the window, kissing her cheek and waking her up. She'd hear the clang of Hopper moving dishes around in the kitchen, and the crisp scent of bacon would make her stomach grumble. She'd climb out of her warm cocoon of her blankets, to find Hopper whistling while he flipped pancakes. He'd turn around, pausing his tune to smile at her and muss her hair and say,

"Good morning, sleepy. How was your night? Only good dreams?"

And she would smile, a real, happy smile.

"Only good dreams."